SŪRAH 71

Nūḥ
(Noah)

Prologue

This *sūrah*, devoted to the story of Noah and his people, describes an important experience of advocacy of the divine message on earth. It represents a cycle in the consistent and permanent treatment of mankind, and of the ever-raging battle between good and evil, guidance and error, truth and falsehood. This episode depicts a humanity that is stubborn, hard, established in its ways, toeing the line drawn by arrogant leadership, unwilling to consider the guidance provided or to look at the pointers to faith. These are available everywhere in the universe and within people's own selves, recorded in the open book of the universe and in man's inner soul. At the same time, the *sūrah* shows an aspect of divine mercy represented in the fact that God sent messengers to rescue mankind from their stubborn rejection of guidance, and their blind following of arrogant and erroneous leadership.

The *sūrah* also paints a picture of the tireless efforts of God's messengers to provide erring humanity with guidance. They showed unparalleled patience despite all the adversity they had to contend with and when they had no personal interest in the matter: they did not expect any reward from those who benefited by their guidance, nor did they hope for any personal favour from those who attained faith as a result of their

efforts. They received nothing like the fees charged by universities and educational institutes for the services they provide.

In this *sūrah*, Noah presents to God the final outcome of the 950 years he spent exerting such tireless efforts in advocating the divine faith among his people. Essentially, they had continued to arrogantly and stubbornly follow their leaders who, in turn, possessed wealth and power. His report, as outlined in the *sūrah* states: "*My Lord! I have been pleading with my people night and day, but the more I call them, the further they run away. Whenever I call on them, so that You may forgive them, they thrust their fingers into their ears, draw their garments over their heads, grow obstinate and become even more arrogant and insolent. I have called them openly; I have preached to them in public, and I spoke to them secretly, in private. I said: "Ask your Lord for forgiveness: He is ever forgiving. He will let loose the sky over you with abundance, and will give you wealth and children; and will provide you with gardens and rivers. What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, when it is He who has created you in successive stages? Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern? God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, and He will return you into it and then bring you out again. God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, so that you may walk along its spacious paths.*" (Verses 5–20) Having thus outlined the efforts he made and the varied methods he employed in advocating the divine message among his people, Noah says: "*My Lord! They have disobeyed me and followed those whose wealth and children lead them increasingly into ruin. They have devised a mighty plot, and said to each other: "Do not ever renounce your gods! Do not abandon Wadd, Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq or Nasr. They have led many astray.*" (Verses 21–24)

The result is very negative. Yet a messenger's task remains the same: to advocate God's message.

This extremely difficult experience is shown to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him), who inherited the trust of advocating the divine message throughout the earth until the end of time and who shouldered the heaviest burden assigned to any prophet. He is shown how a former brother of his sought to establish the truth of faith on earth. He is, thus, able to see just how stubborn man can be in resisting the message

of truth, and how corrupt deviant leadership can be and how it can overpower guided leadership. He learns of God's will to send messenger after messenger to provide mankind with guidance, and this despite all the stubborn and continuous rejection from as early as the days of Noah (peace be upon him).

This experience is shown to the Muslim community in Makkah, and to the Muslim community generally, because it is the heir to God's message to mankind. It is charged with implementing the code of life based on the divine message, even in the midst of the *jāhiliyyah* prevalent at the time, and in the midst of every subsequent *jāhiliyyah*. The Muslim community thus sees the picture of firm resolve represented by Noah, the second father of mankind, who struggled over such a long period of time, to present God's message. It sees the care God took of the small number of believers who accepted Noah's message and who were saved from the total destruction that engulfed their unbelieving fellows.

Noah's experience is also presented to the Makkan unbelievers, showing them the fate suffered by their unbelieving predecessors. They may thus realize that God has bestowed a great favour on them, sending them a kind Messenger who cares greatly for them. This Messenger does not appeal to God to destroy them as Noah did. It is God's grace that has determined that they will be given respite. Noah prayed to God to take away all unbelievers after he had exhausted all means, efforts and methods in calling on them to follow divine guidance. It was only at that juncture that he made his heartfelt appeal: "*And Noah said: 'Lord! Do not leave a single unbeliever on earth. If you spare them, they will lead Your servants astray and beget none but sinners and hardened unbelievers.*" (Verses 26–27)

In presenting this episode in the advocacy of God's message, the *sūrah* clearly shows the unity of the divine faith and its firm, unchanging roots, as well as its close link with the universe, God's will and life's events as they take place according to what God has determined. We see all this through what Noah says to his people by way of warning and instruction: "*He said: 'My people, I am here to warn you plainly. Worship God alone and fear Him, and obey me. He will forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term. When God's appointed*

term comes, it can never be put back, if you but knew it." (Verses 2–4) We also see it as the *sūrah* quotes Noah saying to his people: "*What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, when it is He who has created you in successive stages? Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern? God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, and He will return you into it and then bring you out again. God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, so that you may walk along its spacious paths.*" (Verses 13–20)

Establishing this truth about the unity of God's message in the hearts of the Muslim community is particularly important. It helps Muslims to understand the truth of their message and that they descend from a long line of believers starting from the very early days of humanity. It also tells them of their role in advocating this message, which embodies the code God has laid down for human life.

Why the Effort?

When we look at the great efforts exerted by God's messengers (peace be upon them all) in presenting guidance to a stubbornly erroneous humanity, and consider that it has been God's will to send them, one after another, for this purpose, we should be nothing less than overwhelmed.

One may well ask whether the results have justified such long efforts and noble sacrifices, from Noah's early time through to Muḥammad's own time, as well as the intervening and subsequent efforts and sacrifices made by believers in God's message. Nonetheless such efforts and sacrifices have continuously been made and this in the face of ridicule and abuse. Indeed some messengers faced burning in the fire or were cut in halves with a saw, or had to flee their homeland and abandon their families. When the final message was given, the Prophet Muḥammad and those who followed him made strenuous efforts to establish it. Further efforts and sacrifices have been made by believers ever since. The question is, then whether the results justify such efforts and sacrifices? Should this struggle be maintained? Does humanity deserve such divine care? Does this insignificant creature called man, so arrogant and stubborn

that he still resists the truth, deserve such care from God manifested in sending messenger after messenger?

The answer based on much thought and reflection is unarguably 'Yes, indeed.' To establish the truth of faith on earth merits all these efforts, struggles and sacrifices made by God's messengers and their followers throughout every generation. Perhaps the establishment of this truth is greater than man's existence, and greater than the earth and all who live on it. It is indeed greater than the universe in which the earth is no more than a little, hardly visible particle.

God has willed to create man with special qualities that make the establishment of this truth in his conscience and way of life dependent on his own human effort, with God's help and guidance. We do not know why God created man such, why He let his acquisition of faith be dependent on his own efforts, or why He made him neither a naturally obedient believer like the angels nor a completely evil, disobedient creature like Satan. We believe, however, that creating man with such a nature and qualities serves a divine purpose related to the creation of the universe and its operative system.

This means that human efforts are needed to establish the truth of faith in man's world. God has chosen some of the best of His servants to make such efforts. These are the prophets and the messengers, as well as select groups of true followers. These are the ones assigned the task of establishing this truth on earth; it deserves such strenuous efforts and great sacrifices. When this truth is firmly rooted in a human heart, then that heart enjoys a ray of God's light. It harbours one of His secrets and becomes a means for the fulfilment of His will, a will that will inevitably be done. All this is fact, not just a figure of speech. It is a truth that is greater than man and his world, and even the whole universe.

Moreover, the establishment of this truth in the life of humanity, or a section of it, provides a link between this earthly life of ours and eternal life. Thus, human life is elevated to maintain the link between what ends in death and what is eternal, between the part and the whole, between the defective and the absolutely perfect. Such a result is greater than all efforts and sacrifices, even though it may last for a day or part of one day during human life on earth. When this truth is thus established, it

provides all generations of humanity with a lantern of true light. This lantern then takes practical form which it will strive to maintain.

History has repeatedly shown that humanity only attained the heights it is able to reach when the truth of God was established. No other means enabled mankind to reach such summits. Those periods in history when truth was so established, and its advocates were in leadership, were indeed the highest summits reached in human life. This was greater than man's ultimate dreams, yet it was a living reality. It is simply not possible for humanity to rise with the help of any philosophy, science, art, creed or system to the level it attained and can always attain through the establishment of faith in people's hearts, lives, morality, values and standards. This truth of faith provides the basis of a complete way of life, whether it is given in a general form as in the early messages, or in a very detailed one as is the case in its final version.

When humanity lost the leadership of true believers, it suffered depression, intellectual confusion and nervous ailments, despite its progress in all spheres of civilization. It might have had abundance of the means of physical comfort, intellectual enjoyment and material affluence, but it could not achieve true happiness.

Without doubt, then, the effort is worth it. We should strive with whatever we have and make what sacrifices are necessary to establish this truth of faith on earth. Mankind, however, will continue to turn away, as they did when they were addressed by Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad and others of God's noble messengers. They will continue to follow those who lead them far astray. Their leadership will continue to persecute the advocates of faith, inflicting on them whatever brutal treatment they can. Yet despite all this, the divine message will continue along its way, as God wants it to be, because the outcome deserves it all, even though it is no more than a single heart receiving God's light.

The fact that messengers continued to be sent by God, from the time of Noah to the time of Muḥammad, (peace be upon both of them), confirms that it is God's will that advocacy of the divine faith should continue so that it produces its extraordinary results. The minimum result is that the truth of faith becomes well settled in the hearts of its advocates so that they hold firmly to it even though they may be exposed

to death or what is worse than death. In this way, they will rise above all the lure of this life, and this by itself is a great gain for those advocates in person and for humanity as a whole. Indeed, humanity gains in honour through the presence of such people. It becomes worthy of the honour God gave it when He commanded the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam, the creature who corrupts the earth and sheds blood but who can, nevertheless, through his own efforts and sacrifices, become worthy of receiving a ray of God's light.

Nūḥ (Noah)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

We sent Noah to his people: 'Warn your people, before grievous suffering befalls them.' (1)

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَا نُوحًا إِلَىٰ قَوْمِهِ أَنْ أَنذِرْ قَوْمَكَ مِن قَبْلِ أَن يَأْتِيَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١﴾

He said: 'My people, I am here to warn you plainly. (2)

قَالَ يَا قَوْمِ إِنِّي لَكُمْ نَذِيرٌ مُّبِينٌ ﴿٢﴾

Worship God alone and fear Him, and obey me. (3)

أَنِ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَاتَّقُوهُ وَأَطِيعُونِ ﴿٣﴾

He will forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term. When God's appointed term comes, it can never be put back, if you but knew it.' (4)

يَغْفِرْ لَكُم مِّن ذُنُوبِكُمْ وَيُؤَخِّرْكُمْ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى ۚ إِنَّ أَجَلَ اللَّهِ إِذَا جَاءَ لَا يُؤَخَّرُ ۖ لَوْ كُنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤﴾

He said: 'My Lord! I have been pleading with my people night and day, (5)

قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي دَعَوْتُ قَوْمِي لَيْلًا وَنَهَارًا ﴿٥﴾

but the more I call them, the further they run away. (6)

فَلَمْ يَزِدْهُمْ دُعَائِي إِلَّا فِرَارًا ﴿٦﴾

Whenever I call on them, so that You may forgive them, they thrust their fingers into their ears, draw their garments over their heads, grow obstinate and become even more arrogant and insolent. (7)

وَإِنِّي كُلَّمَا دَعَوْتُهُمْ لِتَغْفِرَ لَهُمْ جَعَلُوا أَصَابِعَهُمْ فِي آذَانِهِمْ وَاسْتَغْشَوْا ثِيَابَهُمْ وَأَصَرُّوا وَاسْتَكْبَرُوا اسْتِكْبَارًا ﴿٧﴾

I have called them openly; (8)

ثُمَّ إِنِّي دَعَوْتُهُمْ جِهَارًا ﴿٨﴾

I have preached to them in public, and I spoke to them secretly, in private. (9)

ثُمَّ إِنِّي أَعْلَنتُ لَهُمْ وَأَسْرَرْتُ لَهُمْ إِسْرَارًا ﴿٩﴾

I said: "Ask your Lord for forgiveness: He is ever forgiving. (10)

فَقُلْتُ اسْتَغْفِرُوا رَبَّكُمْ إِنَّهُ كَانَ غَفَّارًا ﴿١٠﴾

He will let loose the sky over you with abundance, (11)

يُرْسِلِ السَّمَاءَ عَلَيْكُم مِّدْرَارًا ﴿١١﴾

and will give you wealth and children; and will provide you with gardens and rivers. (12)

وَيُمْدِدْكُم بِأَمْوَالٍ وَبَنِينَ وَيَجْعَل لَّكُمْ جَنَّاتٍ وَيَجْعَل لَّكُمْ أَنْهَارًا ﴿١٢﴾

What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, (13)

مَّا لَكُمْ لَا تَرْجُونَ لِلَّهِ وَقَارًا ﴿١٣﴾

when it is He who has created you in successive stages? (14)

وَقَدْ خَلَقَكُمْ أَطْوَارًا ﴿١٤﴾

Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, (15)

أَلَمْ تَرَوْا كَيْفَ خَلَقَ اللَّهُ سَبْعَ سَمَاوَاتٍ طِبَاقًا ﴿١٥﴾

placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern? (16)

وَجَعَلَ الْقَمَرَ فِيهِنَّ نُورًا وَجَعَلَ الشَّمْسَ سِرَاجًا ﴿١٦﴾

God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, (17)

وَاللَّهُ أَنبَتَكُم مِّنَ الْأَرْضِ نَبَاتًا ﴿١٧﴾

ثُمَّ يُعِيدُكُمْ فِيهَا وَيُخْرِجُكُمْ إِخْرَاجًا ﴿١٨﴾

and He will return you into it and then bring you out again. (18)

وَاللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُمُ الْأَرْضَ بِسَاطًا ﴿١٩﴾

God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, (19)

لِتَسْلُكُوا مِنْهَا سُبُلًا فِجَاجًا ﴿٢٠﴾

so that you may walk along its spacious paths.'" (20)

قَالَ نُوحٌ رَبِّ إِنَّهُمْ عَصَوْنِي وَاتَّبَعُوا مَنْ لَمْ يَزِدْهُ مَالُهُ وَوَلَدُهُ إِلَّا خَسَارًا ﴿٢١﴾

Noah said: 'My Lord! They have disobeyed me and followed those whose wealth and children lead them increasingly into ruin. (21)

وَمَكَرُوا مَكْرًا كُبَّارًا ﴿٢٢﴾

They have devised a mighty plot, (22)

وَقَالُوا لَا تَذَرُنَّ آلِهَتَكُمْ وَلَا تَذَرُنَّ وَدًّا وَلَا سُوَاعًا وَلَا يَغُوثَ وَيَعُوقَ وَنَسْرًا ﴿٢٣﴾

and said to each other: "Do not ever renounce your gods! Do not abandon Wadd, Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq or Nasr." (23)

وَقَدْ أَضَلُّوا كَثِيرًا وَلَا تَزِدِ الظَّالِمِينَ إِلَّا ضَلَالًا ﴿٢٤﴾

They have led many astray. Lord, grant the wrongdoers increase in nothing but error.' (24)

مِمَّا خَطِيئَاتِهِمْ أُغْرِقُوا فَأُدْخِلُوا نَارًا فَلَمْ يَجِدُوا لَهُمْ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ أَنْصَارًا ﴿٢٥﴾

Because of their sins, they were drowned, and were made to enter the fire. They found none besides God to support them. (25)

وَقَالَ نُوحٌ رَبِّ لَا تَذَرْ عَلَى الْأَرْضِ مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ دَيَّارًا ﴿٢٦﴾

And Noah said: 'Lord! Do not leave a single unbeliever on earth. (26)

إِنَّكَ إِن تَذَرْهُمْ يُضِلُّوا عِبَادَكَ
وَلَا يَلِدُوا إِلَّا فَاجِرًا كَفَّارًا ﴿٢٧﴾

If You spare them, they will lead Your servants astray and beget none but sinners and hardened unbelievers. (27)

رَّبِّ اغْفِرْ لِي وَلِوَالِدَيَّ وَلِمَن دَخَلَ
بَيْتِيَ مُؤْمِنًا وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ
وَلَا تَزِدِ الظَّالِمِينَ إِلَّا تَبَارًا ﴿٢٨﴾

My Lord! Forgive me, my parents and everyone who enters my house as a believer. Forgive all believing men and women. To the wrongdoers grant You no increase except in perdition.' (28)

The Message in Brief

The *sūrah* begins with a statement defining the source of this message of divine faith: "*We sent Noah to his people.*" (Verse 1) This is the source that assigns tasks to God's messengers and from whom they learn the truth of faith. It is the source of all existence and all life. It is He who created mankind, giving their nature the ability to know and worship Him. When they deviated from this straight path, He sent them messengers to bring them back to Him. Noah was the first of these messengers after Adam. The Qur'ān does not mention a message given to Adam after his fall to earth and life thereon. Perhaps he was a teacher who taught his children and grandchildren. With the passage of time, they went astray and adopted idols as deities. These were at first symbols of certain forces they considered holy. Then, they forgot what the symbols signified and worshipped the idols themselves. The most important of those idols were the five mentioned in this *sūrah*. God sent them Noah to bring them back to believing in His oneness and give them the right concept of God, life and existence. Earlier scriptures mention Idrīs as a messenger of God prior to Noah. However, what such scriptures mention is not part of the Islamic faith, because they were subject to distortion, addition and omission.

When we read the stories of earlier prophets given in the Qur'ān, we tend to believe that Noah lived when humanity was still in its

dawn period. He spent 950 years of his life advocating God's message to his people who must have lived a similarly long life. This suggests that humans were still few in number. In saying this we draw on the observation that species that are small in number live long, and that the reverse is true. Perhaps this is a rule of balance. This is merely a personal point of view, but God knows best.

Having established the source of the message, the *sūrah* sums it up in a few words, and we learn that Noah was instructed to deliver a warning: "*Warn your people, before grievous suffering befalls them.*" (Verse 1) The report Noah presents to his Lord, as stated in the *sūrah*, shows that the state in which he found his people, heedless and arrogant, makes warning the sum of his message. In fact, the first thing he does by means of advocacy is to warn them of severe punishment, in either this world or the next, or in both.

The *sūrah* moves straight from assigning the task to its fulfilment, in which the delivery of the warning is prominent. However, this is coupled with a note that raises the hope of the forgiveness of past sins and the deferment of reckoning until the Day of Resurrection. Moreover, the *sūrah* gives a brief outline of the message Noah delivered to his people:

> *He said: 'My people, I am here to warn you plainly. Worship God alone and fear Him, and obey me. He will forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term. When God's appointed term comes, it can never be put back, if you but knew it.* (Verses 2–4)

"*My people, I am here to warn you plainly.*" (Verse 2) He immediately states his role as a warner, clearly explaining his argument. He does not hesitate or wrap his words in a false cover. He leaves no one in confusion as to what he has to say, or what those who reject his message can expect. What he calls for is plain and simple: "*Worship God alone and fear Him, and obey me.*" (Verse 3) All worship must be addressed to God alone, without partners. Fearing God should be the quality that is clearly reflected in feeling and behaviour. Obeying the messenger God sends to a people is the attitude that makes His orders the basis on which they build their way of life and how they determine their rules of behaviour.

These are the broad lines of divine faith in general, but messages may differ in points of detail as also in the concepts they outline, their relative scopes and how profound and comprehensive these are. To worship God alone provides a complete system of life that includes how man visualizes the nature of the Godhead and the nature of servitude to Him, the bond between the Creator and His creatures, as well as the nature of forces and values that operate in the universe and affect human life. Hence, a system for human life is developed on the basis of this concept, giving a special code of living. This code is based on the bond between God and His servants, and on the values He assigns to all things.

To be God-fearing is the true guarantee that people will follow this code of living, abide by it and never try to circumvent it or slacken in its implementation. Moreover, it is the quality that ensures sound moral behaviour that seeks no reward other than being acceptable to God. Moreover, obeying God's messenger is the means that ensures remaining consistent, receiving guidance from its original source. It maintains the link with heaven through the messenger who receives instructions from on high.

These were the broad lines that constituted what Noah called on his people to believe in. They remain the essence of the divine faith for every generation. God promised them in reward what He promises those who turn to Him in repentance: "*He will forgive you your sins and grant you respite for an appointed term.*" (Verse 4) This verse states the reward promised for those who respond to the call to worship God alone, fear Him and obey His messenger. The reward is forgiveness of past sins, a respite lasting until the time appointed for reckoning, which means until the Day of Judgement, so that they will not be punished in this life like other communities that were totally destroyed. Later in the *sūrah*, we see that Noah promised his people certain other things to be granted in this life.

Noah also confirms that this appointed time is inevitable: it comes at the moment determined for it. It will not be postponed like the delayed punishment in this world: "*When God's appointed term comes, it can never be put back, if you but knew it.*" (Verse 4) This statement may be understood to apply to every time appointed by God, so as to make this fact clear in their minds. It occurs at the appropriate place here, within

the context of the promise that the reckoning will be deferred to the Day of Judgement if they heeded Noah's advice.

Untiring Efforts

Noah began his noble efforts to present guidance to his people. He had no personal interest in the matter, and stood to make no gain to compensate for all the arrogance and ridicule he had to put up with. He continued to do this for a thousand years minus fifty, with the number of those who responded positively hardly increasing. On the other hand, however, the level of rejection and insistence on following old erring ways did increase. At the end, Noah presented his account to God, who had assigned him this arduous task. He described his efforts even though he knew that God was fully aware of all that he had done. He is, therefore, simply making his heart-felt complaint to God, the only One to whom prophets, messengers and true believers ever complain:

> *My Lord! I have been pleading with my people night and day, but the more I call them, the further they run away. Whenever I call on them, so that You may forgive them, they thrust their fingers into their ears, draw their garments over their heads, grow obstinate and become even more arrogant and insolent. I have called them openly; I have preached to them in public, and I spoke to them secretly, in private. I said: 'Ask your Lord for forgiveness: He is ever forgiving. He will let loose the sky over you with abundance, and will give you wealth and children; and will provide you with gardens and rivers. What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, when it is He who has created you in successive stages? Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern? God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, and He will return you into it and then bring you out again. God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, so that you may walk along its spacious paths.'* (Verses 5–20)

Thus, Noah describes his untiring efforts at the end of his long, long journey: "*My Lord! I have been pleading with my people night and day.*"

(Verse 5) He never slackened or showed any sign of boredom or despair in the face of determined and increasing opposition: "*but the more I call them, the further they run away.*" (Verse 6) They ran away from the messenger who called on them to believe in God, the Giver of life, the Provider of everything they had and the Source of every light and guidance. Yet this messenger from whom they ran away never asked for anything in return for what he presented or taught them. He only called on them to believe so that they might be forgiven their sins.

When they could not physically run away, because he addressed them face to face, taking every opportunity to make his address heard, they loathed listening to him or even looking at him. They turned away in arrogance, intent on following their erring ways. "*Whenever I call on them, so that You may forgive them, they thrust their fingers into their ears, draw their garments over their heads, grow obstinate and become even more arrogant and insolent.*" (Verse 7) In this scene the advocate of the divine faith is seen using every opportunity to deliver his message, while they remain adamant, unwilling to hear. We see humanity here in its early stages, stubborn like a headstrong child, putting its fingers in its ears so that it does not hear, and covering its head and face. It is an image of childish resistance. The *sūrah* says they '*thrust their fingers into their ears*', yet people can only put the tips of their fingers into their ears. The statement, thus, imparts an impression of violent reaction, as if they wanted to put their whole fingers into their ears to ensure that nothing of Noah's words could be heard. How childish!

Provisions in Abundance

In his strenuous efforts to fulfil his mission, Noah used every method, addressing them openly at times, and speaking to them in private on others: "*I have called them openly; I have preached to them in public, and I spoke to them secretly, in private.*" (Verses 8–9) In all this, he put before them immeasurable gains both in this life and in the life to come. The first prospect he put before them was forgiveness of their sins: "*I said: Ask your Lord for forgiveness: He is ever forgiving.*" (Verse 10) He also put before them the prospect of abundant provisions to be granted through rain pouring down in plenty, so that plants can grow and rivers

run. He also added other types of God's grace, ones they loved dearly: children and wealth: "*He will let loose the sky over you with abundance, and will give you wealth and children; and will provide you with gardens and rivers.*" (Verses 11–12)

Noah linked granting such provisions to seeking God's forgiveness of sins and misdeeds. This correlation between following God's guidance and attaining purity of heart on the one hand and a life of plenty and prosperity on the other is stated in several places in the Qur'ān: "*had the people of those cities believed and been God-fearing, We would indeed have opened up for them blessings out of heaven and earth. But they disbelieved, so We smote them on account of what they had been doing.*" (7: 96) "*If only the people of earlier revelations would believe and be God-fearing, We should indeed efface their [past] bad deeds, and bring them into gardens of bliss. If they would observe the Torah and the Gospel and all that has been revealed to them by their Lord, they would indeed be given abundance from above and from beneath.*" (5: 65–66) "*Worship none but God. I come to you from Him as a warner and a bearer of glad tidings. Seek forgiveness of your Lord, and then turn towards Him in repentance, and He will grant you a goodly enjoyment of life for an appointed term. He will grant everyone with merit a full reward for his merit.*" (11: 2–3)

This is, then, a true rule repeatedly stated in the Qur'ān. It is based on certain conditions involving a promise by God and the rules He set for human life. History confirms its fulfilment during different generations. The rule applies to communities and nations, not to individuals. Every community that implemented God's law, truly looking up to Him, doing good and beneficial deeds and seeking His forgiveness in a way that reflected fearing Him, benefited by this promise. Every community that worshipped God and feared Him, implementing His law and establishing justice and security for all people, was given provisions in plenty and a life of strength and affluence.

Having said this, we realize that some communities are left to enjoy a life of power and prosperity, despite the fact that they are far from being God-fearing or following His guidance. This is merely a test: "*We test you all with evil and good by way of trial.*" (21: 35) Moreover, such prosperity is often accompanied by different ills such as the lack of social cohesion, loose morality, injustice, disregard for human dignity, etc. We

see today two superpowers,[1] seemingly enjoying power and plentiful provisions: one of them is capitalist while the other communist. In the first, morality has sunk to the lowest level. The prevailing vision of life has become so low that all life has become materialistic, measured by the dollar. In the other, the value of man has gone below the level of slavery. Intelligence agencies have become too powerful and people live in constant fear, threatened in their own homes. Several massacres have taken place, and no one is assured that by the morning his head will remain in place. A false allegation can easily find it chopped off. Neither condition can be described as a truly prosperous human life.

We continue with Noah and his untiring efforts. We see him trying to turn people's attentions to the signs pointing to God, be these from within themselves or in the world around them. He wonders at their carelessness and rudeness: "*What is the matter with you? Why do you behave with such insolence towards your Lord, when it is He who has created you in successive stages?*" (Verses 13–14)

These stages of creation to which Noah refers must have been something which people either knew about or could understand at that time. He is obviously reminding them of something they know and hopes will have the desired effect of leading them to a positive response. Most commentators on the Qur'ān say that the expression refers to the different stages the embryo goes through, starting with a gamete, then becoming a clinging cell mass, before it becomes a human embryo, and acquires a skeleton and is subsequently given its full shape and form. Noah's people could understand this because pregnant women suffered abortions at different stages of pregnancy, thus giving man a clear idea of how the human grows. This is one interpretation of the statement. It could also be a reference to what embryology says about the creation of man. It starts like a one-celled creature, then becomes like a multi-celled creature before acquiring the form of a water animal, then it becomes like a mammal, before it acquires human shape. This was however far from comprehensible to Noah's people, being only a very recent discovery. This interpretation may be the meaning of another Qur'ānic statement that mentions the stages of the embryo before saying: "*We then bring this*

1. This is a reference to the USA and the Soviet Union. Editor's note.

into being as another creation." (23: 14) Both statements, however, may mean something else that remains beyond our present knowledge. Be that as it may, Noah draws the attention of his people to look at their creation and how it is done in stages. He reproaches them for knowing this and yet remaining insolent in their attitude towards their Lord. This is all very singular.

Signs in Plenty

Noah directs his people's attention to the open book of the universe: "*Do you not see how God has created seven heavens in layers, placing in them the moon for a light and the sun for a lantern?*" (Verses 15–16) We cannot specify a meaning for the '*seven heavens*' on the basis of scientific theories about the universe, for these are only theories. Noah simply draws their attention to the skies. He tells them, as God taught him, that there are seven heavens in layers, and that they include the sun and the moon, which they could obviously see, just as they saw what they called the sky, which is that familiar blue coloured space. To know what it is exactly is not necessary. Nor has it been properly proven even today. The invitation to look though is enough to reflect on the supreme power that has brought such great creatures into existence. This is what Noah wanted his people to do. He then invites them to look at their own creation, starting from dust and returning to it after death, and emphasizing the truth of resurrection: "*God has made you spring from the earth like a plant, and He will return you into it and then bring you out again.*" (Verses 17–18)

The reference to man originating from the earth like a plant is both amazing and inspiring. It is repeated in the Qur'ān in various forms: "*Good land brings forth its vegetation in abundance, by its Lord's leave, but from the bad land only poor and scant vegetation comes forth.*" (7: 58) This verse refers to the similarity of the origin of both man and vegetation. Both are referred to in the same verse stressing the truth of resurrection: "*Mankind! If you are in doubt as to the resurrection, remember that We have created you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass, then out of an organized and unorganized embryo, so that We might make things clear to you. We cause to rest in the [mothers'] wombs whatever*

We please for an appointed term, and then We bring you forth as infants, that you may grow up and attain your prime. Some of you die young, and some live on to abject old age when all that they once knew they know no more. You can see the earth dry and barren; and [suddenly,] when We send down water upon it, it stirs and swells and puts forth every kind of radiant bloom." (22: 5) In the following *sūrah*,[2] the stages of the embryo are outlined in similar terms to the verse above. It is then followed by this statement: "*And by means of this water We bring forth for you gardens of date-palms and vines.*" (23: 19)

This is certainly worth studying. It suggests that the origins of life on earth are the same, and that the making of man is the same as the making of plants. Man is made of the earth's simple elements and feeds on such elements to grow. Thus, he is a plant like the rest of earth's plants. He is given a form of life different from that of plants, but both originate from mother earth, which suckles them both. We see how faith gives a believer a complete and true concept of his relation to the earth and to other living things. This concept combines scientific accuracy with warm feelings, which is the distinctive mark of true Qur'ānic knowledge.

Those people who came out of the earth will go back into it, because God determines so, just like He brought them into being out of it. Their ashes become mixed with its dust and they become part of it again, just as they were before. Then again, God will bring them out like He did the first time. It is a simple matter that does not require a moment's hesitation if we only look at it from this Qur'ānic angle. Noah points out this truth to his people so that they feel how God's hand lets them grow out of the earth like plants do, and then returns them there. Once they do this, they can easily expect the second life and take it into account. It is so simple and easy, needing no further argument.

Finally, Noah directs his people's hearts to reflect on God's blessing as He enabled them to live easily on earth, conducting their various activities with ease and comfort: "*God has made the earth a vast expanse for you, so that you may walk along its spacious paths.*" (Verses 19–20) This reality is so close to them and they see it all the time in full view. They cannot escape it like they tried to escape from Noah and his warnings.

2. In verse 14 of *Sūrah* 23, The Believers.

In relation to them, the earth is stretched out like a vast expanse. Even in its mountains, God placed paths that are easy for them to traverse. They walk and travel even more easily on the plains. They can thus move about seeking God's bounty, and exchanging goods and benefits. They did not need scientific studies that sought to understand the natural laws that govern and facilitate their life on earth in order to appreciate all this. Indeed, the greater human knowledge gets the more evident the truth of this statement is.

Varied Methods

We see how Noah tried to address his people in various ways, employing a wide range of methods. We also see his patience, perseverance and conscientiousness. He continued to exert these efforts over 950 years before giving this report to his Lord, complaining of the response he had had to contend with. From his succinct and accurate account we see a splendid image of the great efforts he made. Yet all this is merely one ring in the chain of divine messages to mankind. So, what happens next?

> *Noah said: 'My Lord! They have disobeyed me and followed those whose wealth and children lead them increasingly into ruin. They have devised a mighty plot, and said to each other: "Do not ever renounce your gods! Do not abandon Wadd, Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq or Nasr." They have led many astray. Lord, grant the wrongdoers increase in nothing but error.'* (Verses 21–24)

It is a heart-felt complaint. After all Noah's endeavours, guidance and sound advice and the promise of an easy, plentiful life, they chose to disobey and follow the lead of those who had gone far astray, only because the latter enjoyed wealth, children and power. Yet such leaders benefit nothing by all these blessings. Indeed, their "*wealth and children lead them increasingly into ruin.*" (Verse 21) What they possessed of wealth and children tempted them to go further astray, a scenario that could only end in misery and ruin. Yet these leaders did not stop at just going astray. Instead: "*They have devised a mighty plot.*" (Verse 22)

Their plot was on a grand scale, and its aim was to foil Noah's efforts, to suppress his message and to prevent it from addressing people's hearts. They schemed to give their disbelief and ignorance an attractive colour. Therefore, they urged people to adhere to their false beliefs and to continue to worship those idols whom they called gods. They "*said to each other: 'Do not ever renounce your gods!'*" They sought to arouse people's personal emotions, making them feel that these idols were 'their own' gods. They mentioned the names of the most important ones, so as to stir people's false pride in them: "*Do not abandon Wadd, Suwā', Yaghūth, Ya'ūq or Nasr.*" (Verse 23) These were indeed the largest and the most important of their idols. Indeed, they continued to be worshipped in other ignorant communities until the time of the Islamic message.

This remains the practice of erring leaderships. They create idols that may differ in name and form, according to the going trends in different *jāhiliyyah* societies. They seek to rally the masses around such idols and stir their emotions to defend them so that they can lead them wherever they want to, ensuring that they remain in error. This is how they manage to lead people astray: "*They have led many astray.*" (Verse 24) Indeed every type of erring leadership tries to rally the people around idols, which may be in the form of statues, or humans or ideas. They are all the same, manipulated to turn people away from the divine message, creating a schism between them and its advocates. It is all part of a grand scheme, a mighty plot with a selfish end.

Noah's Prayer

A passionate prayer is then voiced by Noah against the oppressors, the wrongdoers who lead people astray through plots and schemes of their own devising: "*Lord, grant the wrongdoers increase in nothing but error.*" (Verse 24) It is the prayer of one who has tried for a long time, making every effort and using every method. Eventually, however, he came to the conclusion that those erring, wrongdoing hearts were altogether devoid of goodness, undeserving of divine guidance.

Before completing Noah's prayer, the *sūrah* gives us an image of the end suffered by those wrongdoers in this life and in the life to come.

Both situations are present in God's knowledge. They are events that admit no change:

> *Because of their sins, they were drowned, and were made to enter the fire. They found none besides God to support them.* (Verse 25)

It is because of their sins and disobedience that they were made to drown and enter the fire. The two events are intentionally joined in succession, because their entry into the fire is connected to their drowning. The time gap between the two is so short that it is almost non-existent; according to God's measures it is negligible. The sequence is there: they were drowned in this life and they are made to enter the fire in the life to come. What is in between is perhaps the torment in the grave during the short gap between the two lives. "*They found none besides God to support them.*" (Verse 25) None whatsoever! No children, no wealth, no power and no patron from among their alleged deities.

In a single short verse, these mighty ones are swept away and no mention is left of them in human memory. No details are given here of their drowning or the floods that swept them away. This because the *sūrah* wants to leave us with the impression of swift punishment. Indeed, it covers the gap between their drowning and their entry into hell with the conjunction *fa*, rendered in translation as 'and'. This is a common feature of the inimitable Qur'ānic style. Therefore, we do not go into any further details of this event here.

The *sūrah* then gives the remainder of Noah's passionate prayer:

> *And Noah said: 'Lord! Do not leave a single unbeliever on earth. If You spare them, they will lead Your servants astray and beget none but sinners and hardened unbelievers. My Lord! Forgive me, my parents and everyone who enters my house as a believer. Forgive all believing men and women. To the wrongdoers grant You no increase except in perdition.'* (Verses 26–28)

In his heart of hearts, Noah felt that the earth needed to have a complete change, a change that would eradicate the evil that had become so deeply entrenched among his people. Sometimes, only such

eradication of the wrongdoers from the face of the earth will suffice. Their continued presence may put the divine message under siege, preventing it from touching people's hearts. This is exactly the scenario Noah states in his appeal to God to destroy these tyrannical oppressors, leaving none of them to walk the earth. He says: "*If You spare them, they will lead Your servants astray.*" (Verse 27) Describing those people forced to go astray as '*Your servants*' suggests that they are the believers. This is a reference to how such wrongdoers will always use brute force to turn people away from divine faith. He may also mean that they lead others astray when people see them enjoying power and authority, without being punished for their wrongdoing.

Moreover, they create an environment in which unbelievers are born and reared. This whole environment of unbelief and its determined rejection of God's message leaves no way for the young to see the light. It overwhelms them with its erroneous beliefs and practices. It is to this fact that Noah, God's noble messenger, refers when he says that these wrongdoers will, "*beget none but sinners and hardened unbelievers.*" (Verse 27) They create within the community an atmosphere based on falsehood and establish systems, traditions and situations that only help to lead the young into sin and disbelief. Thus, the new generation will always be composed of '*sinners and hardened unbelievers*', as Noah said.

It is for this reason that Noah made his sweeping appeal to God, and God answered his prayer, washing that evil off the face of the earth. Noah ended his appeal against the unbelievers by a request to God to increase their ruin: "*To the wrongdoers grant You no increase except in perdition.*" (Verse 28)

Noah also made a different sort of passionate and humble appeal to God: "*My Lord! Forgive me, my parents and everyone who enters my house as a believer. Forgive all believing men and women.*" (Verse 28) His prayer that God forgives him his sins is an aspect of the good manners all prophets maintain when addressing God. Noah knows that he is only a human being appealing to God. He knows that no matter how diligent he is in his obedience and worship, he makes mistakes and remains short of the high standard believers should try to attain. He also realizes the truth the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) later expressed

when he said that no human being, not even a prophet, is admitted into heaven on the basis of his actions only, unless God bestows His grace on him. This appeal for forgiveness is exactly what he called upon his people to do, but they were too arrogant to take heed. Yet Noah, God's noble messenger who has untiringly sought to advocate God's message, seeks God's forgiveness at the moment he presents his account.

His prayer for his parents is an aspect of dutifulness towards parents who are believers. This is what we understand from the fact that he prayed for them. Had they been unbelievers, he would have been told not to pray for their forgiveness, as he was told that his son, an unbeliever, met his merited fate when he was drowned with the rest of the unbelievers. This is clearly mentioned in *Sūrah* 11, Hūd.

His special prayer for everyone who entered his home as a believer marks the mutual love between believers. Everyone loves for others to receive the same grace as he receives. This special mention of those who enter his home refers to the fact that they were the ones to be saved from the floods; they were the ones on the Ark with him.

Noah's final prayer is for the forgiveness of all believing men and women throughout all generations and localities. It emphasizes the close bond that unites them all, different as their communities and times may be. This is a remarkable quality of the divine faith, establishing this strong bond of genuine love between all believers across the centuries. It tells of the hidden secret God has incorporated into the divine faith and placed in believers' hearts.

Contrasted with this love among believers is the genuine aversion expressed towards unbelievers: "*To the wrongdoers grant You no increase except in perdition.*" (Verse 28)

In this way does the *sūrah* conclude after having given us a bright picture of Noah's struggle, as contrasted with the unbelievers' stubborn rejection. It leaves us with feelings of love towards this great prophet, and admiration for his hard struggle. It strengthens our resolve to follow the same route no matter what hardship we have to endure and no matter what sacrifices we are called upon to make. It is the only route that ensures mankind attains the highest standard possible in their life on earth.